**Matthew 18:10-14**

**God’s compassion for us**

Over the last few weeks, we have been thinking about our frailty and God’s care for us. A few weeks ago, we looked at the passage in Mark 10, where Jesus said that we must develop a childlike faith if we want to enter the Kingdom of God. We also looked at the passage from John’s Gospel, in which Jesus said that we must be born again. Last week, we thought about the fatherly love of God and that he wants to answer of prayers when we recognize our reliance on him and are prepared to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.

 This week, we are thinking about this parable of Jesus concerning the lost sheep and how the shepherd will go to find that lost sheep and will rejoice when he finds it. And, of course, this is a parable about how God loves each one of us so much that he will seek us out and find us when we are feeling lost. This is not a parable about those people who are on the margins of society so much as a parable about those of us who feel lost and vulnerable in our daily lives or in our own walk with God.

 It’s a story about how, when we are feeling weak and vulnerable, God will seek us out and bring us home to him. And this is a story, this is a spiritual truth, that we all need to hear because which one of us has never felt vulnerable in life, which one of us has never felt lost with God, not sure what to believe when the storms of life have threatened to overwhelm us. We have all been that lost sheep at one time or another and perhaps you are that lost sheep today.

 So this is a parable to give us comfort when we need it. But it also begins with a warning for us all about how we are to treat our Christian brothers and sisters when they are feeling weak in faith. As Jesus says in verse 10: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”

 It seems like a strange thing to say, doesn’t it? But actually, it is not uncommon for Christians to despise their brothers and sisters who are struggling in life or in the Christian faith. What might that look like?

 Well, the word ‘despise’ means ‘to look down on someone’: to consider that person inferior or not really worth caring for. Sadly, that attitude is too often seen in churches far and wide. A Christian has been coming to church for many years despises the lack of understanding of a new Christian or the fact that they may behave differently in church. A new Christian despises the stand-offish behavior of a more established believer. Or one Christian may look down on another Christian because of certain things that they do in their life which the first Christian does not approve of or perhaps because of something in his or her past which has come to light. Sometimes Christians want to spend time seeking the approval or friendship of a particular group of believers and so don’t bother chatting with other people over coffee after the service.

 Despising others can happen in many different ways and most of these are sins of omission; ignoring others, not caring for them, judging them. Rarely would one Christian actually feel the emotion of despising another or actually hate them, but by refusing to care enough or value enough, the act of despising has happened.

 Jesus warns us against this in very strong terms here - and each one of us needs to be constantly on our guard, and examine ourselves to make sure that we are not despising others; not so much through what we do but through what we don’t do.

 Are we seeking out newcomers and making them feel welcome?

 Are we acting out of kindness through our words and actions?

 Are we looking out for those who are struggling in the faith and encouraging them?

 Jesus says, “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones…”

 And why is it so important? He goes on to say this: “…for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.” What does he mean by this?

 Well, some people have taken this to mean that children have guardian angels in heaven watching over them. But that is not what he is saying here. It is much broader than that. What Jesus is suggesting is that, in heaven, angels are assigned to the spiritual care of all believers. It’s not just children – it’s all of us.

 Now, I have to be honest and say that I really don’t know what angels are, or what they do, or what their relationship is to us and to God. There’s loads of warm and fuzzy ideas in society about what angels are but very few of them actually relate to the Christian faith and what the Bible has to say about angels, so I generally discount that sort of myth.

 All I know from this passage is that, in some sense, there are heavenly beings who have care and concern for each one of us here today and if the heavenly beings care for each one of us, then it is our responsibility to care for one another.

 The issue about the nature of angels is a sideshow here. What is really important is how you and I will care for each other in the way that God wants us to.

 But if you are feeling vulnerable in your faith at the moment, then you can take comfort in the fact that you have support not only from God, not only from other Christians around you here at St. Andrew’s, but also from the heavenly host of angels, whatever that may be.

 If you remember one thing from the sermon today, it must be this: You are not alone.

 And Jesus then moves onto the ultimate description of care and compassion that is available to each one of us: which is the care and compassion of our heavenly Father towards us. To do that, Jesus shares this parable with his disciples the parable of the lost sheep:

 “If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of yourFather in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

 Let’s unpack this parable a little bit so we can understand Jesus’ teaching better.

 We know, of course, that tending sheep was a major role in Palestine during the days of Jesus because it was such an agricultural context. Jesus’ question to the disciples is purely rhetorical because everyone knew the value of sheep to the community and everyone knew that any shepherd worth his salt would seek out a lost sheep. That was their job: they would secure the 99 and seek out the lost one.

 But it is a lovely analogy because it reminds us that all of God’s sheep – each one of us – are equally loved and cared for by God. It doesn’t matter which sheep has gone astray; he will seek out any one of his flock. None are more important to God than another. He will not seek out a Pope or an Archbishop of Canterbury any more than he will seek out you or me, because he loves us just as much as he loves the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. We are all equal in his eyes, we are all equally his children, and we are all equally loved.

 And just as importantly, God does not make any judgment on why the sheep is lost: he just goes out to find it. Perhaps the sheep has got lost by accident. Perhaps the sheep has done something really stupid that has separated it from the flock. It doesn’t matter to God – a lost sheep is a lost sheep, and it needs finding.

 So whether you or I have gone astray due to the tough circumstances of life or whether you or I have done something really stupid to separate us from God, it really doesn’t matter to him: he will come and find us without any judgment at all because God loves each one of us beyond anything that we can imagine.

 And not only will God seek us out, he will rejoice when he finds us, as Jesus reminds us in verse 13: “And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.”

 When a lost sheep is found, there is much rejoicing. When a Christian is restored to the church, or strengthened in faith, the whole of heaven rejoices at that. When you return to the Lord, when I return to the Lord, the whole of heaven rejoices.

 And, of course, that’s something we remind ourselves of each week in the Communion Prayer, when we say: “Therefore with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name, forever praising you and singing…” These are not just poetic words! This is the description of a spiritual reality that is being acted out this morning, here at St. Andrew’s and in heaven.

 And so Jesus concludes this beautiful parable by reiterating the overwhelming power of God’s love for each one of us in verse 14: “So it is not the will of yourFather in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

 God loves you so much. God loves me so much. He doesn’t want any one of us to be lost, to be hurt, to feel vulnerable or afraid. His overwhelming concern is for your happiness and contentment in life and that you should feel safe and secure in his loving arms. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep and he wants you to experience the depth of that love and care in your life today.

 So this is a short parable, but it has so much to teach us. We are reminded that each one of us has a responsibility for each other: that we are not to despise those who express their faith differently from us, that we are not to judge others for being weaker in faith or judge those who may have something in their past of which they are not proud. That kind of attitude does not reflect the loving heart of God. We are reminded that God loves each one of us so much that he has angels in heaven looking out for us and guarding us as we walk through life. We are reminded that, no matter where we are at in life, God will seek us out if we are feeling lost; no matter who you are or how you got lost in the first place. We are reminded that, when we return to God or when we are found by him, the whole of heaven rejoices.

 It’s a beautiful passage – and a beautiful expression of God’s love and care for you.

 If you are feeling lost today, or if you are feeling afraid, or if you know deep in your heart that you have strayed from God, then let him find you today. Call out his name, and he will hear you and he will restore you and, as you do, the whole of heaven will rejoice…